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THE KANKAKEE RIVER REFUSE HEAP. EVIDENCE
OF A UNIQUE AND PRIMITIVE CULTURE IN
THE SOUTHWESTERN CHICAGO AREA

By GEORGE LANGFORD

FOR the past ten years I have taken considerable interest in the traces of early Indian occupancy of the region about Joliet, in the western portion of Will county, northwestern Illinois. My observing and collecting has extended from Lockport, twenty-five miles to the junction of the Des Plaines and Kankakee, and a similar distance southeast along the latter river through Wilmington and Rock creek. The evidences of aboriginal occupancy are to be found in abundance in the ploughed fields; pottery fragments, flint and chert artifacts, and implements of polished stone; also occasional objects of silver referable to the Jesuits, and a few copper pieces. More than a score of localities are recognizable as well-defined camps comprising several cultures differing from each other in only slight degree and presenting no features peculiar to this district. One locality, however, may be taken as an exception. Its culture possesses distinctive peculiarities, differing in such a marked degree from that of its neighbors, the conventional type, that it is absolutely unique.

This locality is about eighteen miles southwest of Joliet on the Will-Grundy county line, east bank of the Kankakee river one mile south of where the latter and Des Plaines converge to form the Illinois. At this point the land surface rises ten feet or more above the surrounding area and from it a clear view up and down the river can be obtained. In a sharply defined area extending about two hundred and fifty feet along the bank and one hundred and fifty feet inland the cultivated field is thickly strewn with fragmentary Indian relics. This area prior to cultivation over forty years ago was a broad irregular eminence or mound about two feet high. When first turned up by the plough, the sub-soil of this

particular site, like that of the surrounding country, brought to light many flint and stone artifacts common to this region; but when the mound, or refuse heap as I will call it, was partially reduced to the surrounding level by constant ploughing its contents proved to be something new and distinctive. Local collectors became aware of this fact twenty-five years or more ago. The site was described to me as one of little importance; that is, it produced no large or showy pieces; nothing but pottery fragments, "sheep bones," "palaeoliths," and only one kind of arrowpoint, small, triangular, and unstemmed. Taking these statements for granted, I first visited the locality several years ago and one visit was sufficient to convince me that it was one of extraordinary interest. The Kankakee River bank, clay and shale of the lower coal measures, rises over eight feet high at this point. The ground above it was thickly strewn with splintered and broken bones, chert flakes, and arrowpoints, pitted stones, broken stone adzes (celts), pottery fragments pieces of shell, and abundant evidence of fire.

The most characteristic pieces of the refuse heap are the small, triangular, chert arrowpoints, unstemmed, thin, usually more than twice as long as broad, and well made. The largest is 1 1/2 in. x 1 1/16 in.; the smallest, 1/2 in. x 1/4 in.; 1 1/4 in. x 1/2 in. is a good average size. Within the refuse heap area they are, or rather were, extraordinarily abundant. Outside of this area none can be found. I estimate that over fifteen hundred of these points have thus far been uncovered in addition to innumerable broken pieces. Another less abundant type is the long slender point or "drill" with and without broad base. Chert spawls and chips lie in profusion mingled with small "palaeoliths"; blanks and rejects of small triangular point manufacture. These rejects are as plentiful as the finished points. Well formed flakes of larger size, knives, adzes, and scrapers, are not uncommon. The few large notched or stemmed arrowpoints discovered within the refuse heap area are similar to those found in adjoining fields. I consider them as intrusions and less ancient than the refuse heap relics. Large and small pebbles, bruised and pitted, are quite common. Of polished stone objects, several broken adzes and one faintly grooved axe or

mallet head are all that I have seen. The adzes are of more cylindrical cross-section and their cutting edges more curved than others common to this district.

Splintered bones and teeth lie everywhere within the localized area. The so-called "sheep bones" were those of deer and elk, every portion of the skeleton being represented. I have picked up over two hundred *astragali* (ankle bones) of the deer alone. In addition, I have recognized remains of turtles, fishes, raccoons, skunks, beavers, muskrats, several species of canids and felids, bears and birds; their abundance being in the order named. Many are those of young animals. Charred and calcined fragments are plentiful. Among them I have recognized a score of utilized pieces, crude, but unmistakable as artifacts of domestic or ornamental utility made from bones, antlers, and teeth of the deer and elk. One elk incisor is notched around its root; deer phalanges cut off square at one end, hollowed and perforated at the other end; antler points 1 1/2 to 2 inches long cut off square; whittled and hollowed sections of femur, and other pieces of a like nature represent the bone artifacts that I have found among the thousands of skeletal fragments, all limited to the refuse heap area.

The most abundant relics of the deposit are pottery fragments—bushels of body and rim pieces, many burned red or showing other evidence of contact with fire. From them I judge that the people of the refuse heap possessed no mean skill in the art of pottery-making and their ideas of ornamentation, although simple, produced a remarkably pleasing appearance in the finished product.

The pieces are generally thin-walled, compact, partially baked, and tempered with crystalline rock, frequently pulverized shell.

In form I judge the pots to be globular, round-bottomed, sharply inturned at the shoulders, necks short and constricted, rims low and flaring outward. In size they range from eight or nine inches high down to three inches, being broader than high. Seven inches tall by eight inches broad would be a good average size. One thick square-edged fragment and one pierced lump are the nearest approach to rectangular rim and handle respectively. The short outward-flaring rims are in some cases notched, in others turned

down at the top to form a circular bead. Many are unbeaded and unnotched and bear pseudo-fabric decoration.

As a rule the base of the pot is smooth and without decoration, the body cord-modeled with crossed pseudo-fabric lines extending from the lower body to the rim, overlain by incised, traced or trailed lines running around the shoulder of the jar. These lines are straight or slightly curved, two or three parallel extending diagonally up and down forming a sort of continuous chevron ornamentation. The incised lines are scribed with a sharp-pointed tool, the traced lines made probably with an antler point and the trailed decoration laid on with the finger. This chevron arrangement is typical, sometimes on a smooth surface but more often on a cord-modeled or pseudo-fabric field. There is no evidence of circular, scroll or other complicated decoration, not even stamp or roulette work.

The refuse heap pottery in no way resembles the thick-walled, coarse, stamp, and roulette, high-collared pottery common to a site near Birds bridge, Troy township, some ten miles farther north near the Du Page river. The former is undoubtedly the work of another and more ancient people.

The negative evidence of the refuse heap points to a pre-European culture. After continued careful search, I have failed to discover a single object in it of metal, glass, or glazed ware. Remains of the horse are conspicuously absent. Incidentally I have found no trace of the bison; of grain or cloth; of stone ornaments, discoidals, "butterflies," or the like. I have discovered the half of one cylindrical stone pipe; none of clay. Except for the few intrusive large stemmed arrowpoints, I believe that all of the objects I have described are the work of one tribe—the people of the refuse heap; a people skilled in the art of pottery-making but of primitive artistic sense; who made and used only one pattern of arrowpoint, well chipped and serviceable, but quite different from conventional types; who knew nothing of metals and used tools of bone and stone, and whose occupancy of the Kankakee river site extended over a considerable period of time. Judging from collections of similar objects I have observed whose cultural definition has been

generally accepted without challenge, I am impressed by certain strong resemblances of the Kankakee River refuse heap relics to those of western New York pronounced as Iroquoian. Possibly the deposit I have described represents an early stage of Iroquoian progress eastward, or possibly an early stage of northwestern aboriginal development throwing some light on the evolution of one or more of our modern Indian races. I am convinced however that the culture of the refuse heap is unique and distinct from any other in this region and that it is purely neolithic without a single trace of European influence.

JOLIET, ILLINOIS